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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the cross-cultural learning experiences of two Chinese students at a major university in the Eastern United States. The study participants were a graduate student and his wife, both of whom had graduated from prestigious Chinese universities. At the time of the study, they had been in the United States for less than two years. Data were gathered through participant observation and informal interviews. The various sections of the paper discuss: (1) their motivations for learning, including professional growth and personal and political frustrations in their home country; (2) frustrations of cross-cultural living and learning, including communication difficulties, discrimination, disillusionment, and study pressures; (3) satisfactions of cross-cultural living, including a cleaner environment, having the necessities of daily living, fair school enrollment policy, and a law-governed society; (4) their strategies for coping with limited English in school work and in daily life; (5) new perspectives they had gained through learning and their hope of opening doors with better credentials; and (6) cultural differences in the classroom and daily life, including a more interactive student-teacher relationship and differences in behavioral and value systems. The study concludes that schools must be aware of and help international students adjust to such cross-cultural differences. (Contains 18 references.) (CH)

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THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE STUDENTS IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article reports a case study on the cross-cultural learning experiences of two Chinese students in American universities. It described their experiences in the following areas: motivations for learning, frustrations and satisfactions, strategies used to cope with language inefficiency, assumptions of the impact of their learning on their lives, and awareness of cultural differences in classroom and daily life.

The study identified the differences in culture, language, and social and political system between China and the United States as the major sources for these students' positive and negative experiences. It also pointed out that educators can assist these students by becoming aware of their home culture, different learning styles, frustrations in adjusting to school life and in overcoming cultural shocks; and by helping them adjust to American educational system and learn about the American culture.

I. Introduction

This article addresses the issue of how to meet the challenges of diversity in our education system and how to help students with different home cultural backgrounds to become successful learners. Researchers seem to agree with each other that when there is less cultural dissonance, there is more learning taking place (Bennett, 1995). However, there is a great need for more studies on how to help students with different home cultural backgrounds to become successful learners. This qualitative research examined the learning experience of two international students with a Chinese home background, who tried to adjust to the life and culture in a major university within the United States.

Significance of the Study

At the very beginning of the new century, we are ever reminded of the dramatic shifts in population of the United States. These rapid changes in the population are affecting the demographics of the schools in this country. "In 1976, for example, 24 percent of the total school enrollment in U.S. schools was nonwhite. In 1984, this percentage increased to 29 percent. By the year 2000, people of color will comprise one-third of all students enrolled in public schools, and authorities project that by 2020, they will comprise 46 percent of the school population" (Diamond, 1995, p.3). Undoubtedly, this change will require that our educators be prepared to teach students who are racially, linguistically, and culturally different from themselves.

Since the early 1980's, thousands of students from China came to study in universities in the United States. There are approximately forty thousand students from China studying in the United States now (Feng, 1991). These students came from a country that is so far away from the United States in distance, culture, political system, and language. "Culture shock" becomes inevitable. It requires efforts from both the students from China and American educators to make these students' learning experience successful and fulfilling.

It is claimed that students from different cultures learn in different ways, and that they differ in cognitive styles, self-expression and communication styles (Bennett, 1995). Thus, the

understanding of Chinese students,' cultural background, learning experiences and styles by American educators, and the understanding of American society, culture and educational systems by these Chinese students will all contribute to their success in learning.

II. Review of Related Studies

Studies on international students' learning experiences and their adaptations to the U.S. educational system have been conducted from the perspectives of school personnel, intercultural learning patterns, international students as a whole, and individual groups.

Culture is defined as the sum of total ways of living, including values, beliefs, aesthetic standards, linguistic expression, patterns of thinking, behavioral norms, and styles of communication which a group of people has developed to assure its survival in a particular physical and human environment (Pusch, 1979).

Pusch (1979) outlined an intercultural or cross-cultural learning continuum. He argued that learning might run from ethnocentrism at one end of the spectrum to some form of adaptation or integration at the other. **Figure 1.** (Pusch,1979, p. 3.) shows the learning continuum.

Figure 1. The Learning Continuum

Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) did a qualitative study and found that language skills, academic issues, and social interaction were the most difficult adjustment problem areas for international students. These students were more likely to have positive academic and nonacademic experiences if they could adapt to and enjoy contact with the host community, and their successful achievement of academic goals is more likely if the emotional and social atmosphere is pleasant and the environment congenial.

Briggs (1983) called for training programs for people who must interact with different cultures. She argued that when people experience a new cultural environment, they are likely to experience conflict between their own cultural predispositions and the values, beliefs, and opinions of the host culture. A training program, the Cultural Communication Capsule, can aid in cross-cultural adaptation by improving interpersonal and social communication skills.

Surdam (1984) found that adaptation was related to spending leisure time with Americans, adequate knowledge of English, better educated families, and religious participation.

Althen (1990) looked at the problem from a counselor's perspective. He suggested that the orientation programs for international students should include practical information about housing and communication, information about the U.S. academic system, and tips on how to adjust to a new culture.

Perkins (1977) identified significant differences in adjustment from different groups of international students enrolled in an American university. He also investigated significant differences among the groups on particular demographic and social interaction variables. He called for more sophisticated analyses in research concerning international students.

Suzuki (1983) notes that many teachers stereotype Asian and Pacific American students as quiet, hardworking, and docile, which tends to reinforce conformity and stifle creativity. Asian and Pacific American students, therefore, frequently do not develop the ability to assert and express themselves verbally and are channeled in disproportionate numbers into the technical/scientific fields. As a consequence, many Asian and Pacific American students, who

undergo dramatic family and school discontinuities, and suffer from low self-esteem, are overly conforming and have their academic and social development narrowly circumscribed.

The following studies about Chinese students in particular were found in the review.

Elkins (1994) discussed salient patterns within the American and Chinese educational systems, noting that Chinese students are praised for engaging in collectivist behavior, while the American system emphasizes self-reliance and self-confidence. Comparing the Chinese and American cultures, Elkins anticipated problems Chinese students have with their perception of the interpersonal communication course and suggests lesson plans for American teachers to use.

Feng (1991) examined the nature of Chinese students' adaptation to U.S. culture so that student organizations and student service professionals may become more sensitive to and conscious of their needs. The four areas of concern identified are financial difficulty, cultural differences, academic concerns, and language ability.

Zhang (1992) reviewed the literature on subjects relating to Chinese-American students. She provided information on Asian immigrants in the United States, including demographic data, economic and educational background of these Asian immigrants, their identities, academic and language characteristics, influences of their parents and Chinese culture. This study found Chinese students relatively well educated and supportive of education, highly paid, consisting of large families, often bilingual, and generally respectful of authority and tradition.

Bennett (1995) noted that "compared to the research on learning styles of other U.S. ethnic groups, there is a paucity of research on Asian American learners" (p.185).

Although there are studies about international students in general, and Chinese students in particular, the author found there is a need to analyze the situation from a cross-cultural perspective. It is hoped that a cross-cultural look can help educators to learn more about these students and will assist the students in reflecting on their own cross-cultural learning experiences.

III. Methodology

Rationale for a Qualitative Study

The major research question for this study is: How do Chinese students describe their learning experience in American universities?

In this study, qualitative research methods -- participant observation and informal interviews are used. Data are gathered primarily through participant observations and informal interviews. There are several considerations for choosing this research approach:

(1) It is believed that the research question will be better answered, understood and explained through interpreting and describing rather than measuring.

(2) The research questions are general, broad, open-ended and flexible. There are no previously set hypothesis to be tested.

(3) The purpose of this study is not to seek explanations and predications that will generalize to other people and places, but to "subjectively derive understanding from the perspective of observed persons in their own milieu" (Sprinthall, Schmutte and Sirois, 1991).

A cross-cultural perspective refers to the process of looking at cultural phenomena from the perspective of both the culture in which they occur and another culture (Pusch, 1979). Such a perspective is chosen to analyze and interpret the data collected in this study because it is hoped that looking at the phenomena from both sides will generate deeper understanding and explanation for the experiences of these students.

Research Site and Participants:

The study was conducted at a major university in the eastern part of the United States. It has an enrollment of about 40,000 students on its main campus, of whom 320 students are from China. The number increased to 485 when their spouses are included. All of the students are doing graduate work with some of their spouses taking English language classes. They are

working on either Master's or doctorate degrees in science, mathematics, humanities, liberal arts and social science.

One graduate student (Y) and his wife (F) were selected as key informants for this study. Both of them graduated from prestigious Chinese universities and held good jobs in China before coming to the United States. While Y worked as an engineer in the environment protection department at an academy of architecture for seven years, F worked as an engineer in the environment protection department under a Chinese government agency for the same number of years.

At the time of the study, they had been in the United States for less than two years. Y, the husband, was studying in a Master's program in mineral science. F, the wife, came to the United States six months later than her husband. She took her GRE and was applying for a Master's program in environmental studies. At that time, their three-year-old daughter was staying with their grandparents in China. Y and F were selected as key informants for this study because they were still fairly new to the United States, they were willing to share their experiences, and they were typical Chinese students on that campus.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews at Y and F's apartment. The atmosphere was informal and relaxing, so we were able to engage in friendly and informative conversations. The conversations were taped and then transcribed for analysis afterwards. Data were also collected by frequent observations of the informants in their daily life for about a month. Notes were taken after these observations. Different types of data were analyzed by comparing and contrasting at several levels to check for emerging themes.

The trustworthiness of the study is ensured by a long-term engagement -- having sufficient time in the field to understand daily events, by testing emerging assertions -- looking for other ways to organize data that might lead to a different conclusion, by member checking with the informants and by peer debriefing with my colleagues. The fact that the author used to be one of the Chinese students on that campus also contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

IV. Findings and Discussions

The study showed that the informants were highly conscious of the political and cultural differences existing in the two countries, in which they have lived. They have likes and dislikes for living in both countries. They shared their dilemmas and frustrations of being cross-cultural learners, the factors that motivated them to pursue cross-cultural learning, and the strategies they use to cope with the difficulties caused by their limited English in daily life and in the classroom, and the ways that their learning in the United States will change their career and life in the future. Here are the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Finding 1. Motivations For Learning

The study revealed that the interviewees came to study in the United States because they wanted to grow academically and professionally; they wanted to prove that they are different from other people and they want to show their ability; they were not satisfied with their living conditions in China; and they wanted to get away from the unfair treatment they had there.

--- Professional Growth and Own Strength

Both Y and F expressed that one of the motivations for them to go to schools in the United States was to grow professionally and to prove their ability. As F said,

> "I think if I pass TOEFL and study abroad, people will look at me differently. I feel I am more capable than those who cannot do this. I want to go to school to improve myself in some areas. If I stay home, it is a waste. Think about if someone asks me, 'What did you do in the U.S.?' and if my answer is, 'I accompanied Y there?' That will be very embarrassing. Going to school, attending lectures, my English, reading, writing, listening, and speaking will get much better."

Y agreed with what his wife said, "Yes, to prove one's ability."

--- Personal and Political Frustrations in Home Country

Another important motivation for Y and F to come to study in the United States was that they were not happy in China. Although they had prestigious jobs in China, they were not paid well and they were not happy with their housing conditions. While China experiments with the

economic reform, they would rather use the time to update their knowledge in the united States. Y stated,

> "Actually, I didn't get paid well. My family stayed in a room in a 'Tongzi' building, not having a life there. It was not because there were no houses to give out, but it was because they did not want to give it to people like me who had no relations nor backgrounds. The average living spaces for people in Beijing was enough. We were very very upset and angry. I understand that this was a transitional period in China. A time of reform. During the reform time, things get chaotic. Those who get rich, either rely on connections or breaking the law. We waste our life and our academic career. So to study abroad is my way out."

F gave more detailed descriptions of their living conditions and the unfair treatment they received in China that made them come to the United States:

> "People who with only high school diplomas were less qualified than us, but had connections, were assigned houses. While we, no matter what we did, or how hard we worked, no house was assigned to us. When Y left China, my daughter and me moved to my work place, living in a room in the basement. There was only one public bathroom for the entire floor. It was far away and dirty. I never used it. I had to go to my office to use the bathroom. It took me three minutes to get there by bike from my home. Sometimes in the morning, I had to drag my daughter out of bed telling her to be quick because Mammy had to go to the bathroom. I hated that very much. I wondered when that could be changed. In the States, if I am willing to pay the rent -- $400, I can live in this apartment. In China, even if we were willing to pay $500, I do not know if we can rent a place."

Finding 2. Frustrations in Cross-Cultural Living and Learning

Y and F experienced different types of frustrations in learning and living in the United States. These include communication difficulties caused by their limited knowledge of aural and oral English, discriminations caused by the fact that they look and speak differently from other people, disillusionment caused by their failure to pursue further education because of their financial inability and by not learning as much as they expected from classes; and the feeling of pressure in school work and feeling of loss in daily life.

--- Communication Difficulties: Better in Reading & Writing Than Aural & Oral English

Like other international students, Y and F had to take TOEFL, a test of English before they were admitted to universities in the United States. However, getting a good score on the test

does not guarantee that their English is sufficient for living and studying in this country. Like most of the other Chinese students, Y and F learned English since they were young in China, but all this prepared them more for reading and writing than listening and speaking in authentic situations. Y said,

> "I still have difficulty in English. I feel my spoken language is inadequate. It is different from TOEFL scores. My reading and writing abilities are more or less similar to native speakers. Especially when it comes to reading formulas of math, graphics etc. But when it comes to listening and speaking, it is a different story."

F agreed that

> "(t)hey are totally different things. TOEFL tests your book knowledge. Maybe TOEFL should add a part of oral ... I got an above-average score for TOEFL but I cannot understand others when they speak English to me, and others cannot understand me when I speak. But when everything is written down, I understand them all."

--- Discrimination

Y and F believed they were treated differently and unfriendly sometimes because they looked and spoke differently. They said that "90% of the blood and tear part of the history of immigration comes from the discrimination people have for people." They illustrated their points by two stories from their life.

Y explained,

> "Once I went to buy some stamps. The postmaster asked me if I was from China. I told him I was. By the time when he gave me the change, instead of handing it to me or put it on the counter for me, he rolled it to me and it fell to the floor. I refused to pick it up. He had to give me another one."

Y went on.

> "I was buying a supersaving ticket. I got into an argument with the shop assistant. He told me that I didn't make myself clear from the beginning what I want. He implied that I should have said one supersaving ticket for **today**. Instead of saying one supersaving ticket. Think about it. You are not allowed to buy last weeks', neither next weeks'. You can only buy today's. That is the rule. So I was not wrong at all. When he raised his voice,

I raised my voice too. That drew the attention of others in the shop. I believe he was picking on me."

F added, "Our look and faces are different. Our language is different. Plus we are not fluent in English. If you grow up in the U.S. and speak fluent English, they will treat you differently. Yes, no matter where you go, discrimination is unavoidable. Ninety percent of the blood and tears part of the history is caused by discrimination."

--- Disillusionment

Y and F also experienced disillusionment in the United States. Things were different than what they had expected. Financial problems, pressure from school work and not learning as much as they expected from school were some of the things that disillusioned them.

F has been trying to get into a Master's program. She was accepted by several universities but she had not been offered any graduate assistantships yet. As China is still a low-income country, their savings from China could never be enough to pay her tuition in the United States. With Y being a student, he could not support F either. There are grants and students' aids available but she was not qualified because she was an international student. As international students they had to pay a very expensive health insurance premium for the family in that university, which made it hard for them to bring their daughter to the United States. F spoke first this time,

"The worst is that my pursuit of going to graduate school has not gone anywhere. I have not been offered any assistantships yet, even with my good scores in GRE and TOEFL. That makes me feel very bad. I guess I still should blame myself for it. American citizens have a lot of, a lot of advantages which we do not have. There are many different grants and aids they can apply for. I cannot work off campus. And it is hard to get work on campus and plus that is not enough to pay my out-of-state tuition. What is more, the university decides that foreign students have to buy a certain health insurance which is very expensive. Y's assistantship is barely enough for the two of us to live on, so there is no way for him to help me with my tuition. You know, our savings from China means nothing for tuition here."

"In China, when I work I feel I stretched my brains at least. Got challenges when I did projects or edited a journal with other people. I keep up with the academic life. Here I stay home when he goes to school. I watch TV and sleep all day long. It is a waste for me. Another major reason for me to feel bad is that we cannot bring our daughter here because of the present financial situation."

Y added that,

> "It doesn't really mean we are doing better here than home. Not like what I thought before I came here. We expected too much before. I feel American students do not learn as much as Chinese students do in universities. Some teachers here want to attract more students and to raise their fame. They would design some new classes at 500 levels, or special topics, and give students good grades and less work. More students will go to these classes and get good grade. But that doesn't mean they learn. In Chinese universities, if you are not careful, you can easily get a 50% or 60% out of the total sometimes."

--- Pressure in Study

Y expressed that he felt more pressure in the United States than in China. Here he had to be a full-time student and work as a research assistant. He felt the pressure both mentally and physically. Y said,

> "I go to work even over weekend in case my boss wants me and to get more work done. I feel the pressure. This spring break was OK. Last spring break almost broke me. I was running a program and got frustrated. My boss said, 'Maybe it is a mistake for you to come here. This is how it is.' I said, 'This semester is very tough for me. I am new here and have a lot things to adjust to.' He said, 'You should enjoy it. Everyone does a lot of work. Maybe you came as a mistake.' I did not mean to complain, in fact. But it was tough."

Finding 3. Satisfactions in Cross-Cultural Living

There are several aspects that Y and F liked about living and studying in the United States. They enjoy the living conditions -- the environment, i.e., the greenness and cleanness; they like the fact of having the convenience of daily necessities such as close-by bathroom, running hot water and so on. They also like the fair school enrollment policy and the law-governed society.

--- Living Conditions

They were very satisfied with the environment and the living necessities. F commented with a smile,

> "I love the green lawn and trees,the autumn leaves of different colors, birds singing in the morning. Even when wind blows, there is little dust. When it rains, it does not get muddy. Will it take China 100 years to catch up? If my daughter comes, she will be very happy to be able to sit everywhere. So clean! We talked about this many times. All equipment such as gas, running hot water, bathroom. People can take it for granted. We do not have to

worry about missing electricity, or water or gas. Maybe this is what developed country means."

Y told an anecdote,

"When F first came, she was preparing for GRE. To encourage her, can you guess what I said to her? I said 'You do not need to worry now since the bathroom is beside you. You can go to the bathroom anytime you want.' The one in her office was very far away. One mile away."

--- **Fair Policy**

The following is what Y also liked about universities and the society in the United States:

"I came here not because I believe the U.S. is the best country. But I heard that this is a country where law works. Regulations and standards work. This is applied to enrollment in schools. Step by step. Take TOEFL, and GRE... Not like other countries that you never know their standards. In China, sometimes you have to have connections."

Finding 4. Strategies Used to Cope with Limited English

Y and F have developed interesting strategies to cope with their limited spoken English in daily life and study. They take advantage of their better knowledge of reading and writing in English to compensate for their insufficiency in aural and oral English.

--- **School Work**

Y tried to avoid speaking or answering questions that require complicated English in class. He will read books to make up for what he missed in class. He said,

"At first, I remained silent in class even if I know the answers. Now, if it is simple, I will raise my hand and talk. For example, if the teacher wrote: 0 : 2 = 2, I will tell him 0 : 2 = 0. However, I still do not say things require complicated English in class. When I cannot understand the lectures, I will go back home and read my books. My reading always helps me."

--- **Daily Life**

In daily life, Y and F were doing fine by using their knowledge of written English to help with their spoken English. They resorted to their dictionaries, newspapers and books. F said in the interview,

"I was coughing the second day when I got off the airplane. I went to see a doctor. I found my knowledge of book English helped a lot. I checked my dictionary for the

vocabularies I thought I would need before I went to the doctor's. I communicated with the doctor well then. What still frustrates me is that I want to understand TV programs very much, but no matter what I do I cannot understand it. I would watch it several times, still do not understand it. I love to watch news on TV. Now I read newspapers first and then watch the TV version of the news. And I found I can understand a bit more."

Y added that he used the same method when he needed to take his car to a garage. He would get himself familiar with the terms of the different parts he would need and the problems he had with his car before getting his car fixed.

When asked about doing grocery shopping, F said,

"I am OK with shopping, because I do not have to speak. But I do have problems with the labels of goods. I never know how to match the prices with the stuff I want. I sometimes buy things I do not want for not knowing the names. My English classes in China never taught me the names of the goods. That is OK because I learn from my mistakes."

Finding 5. Learning Changes Life

Both Y and F believe that studying and living in the United States would make a difference for them in their career and life. They would be able to gain new perspectives from their studies to contribute to China. Studying in the United States would give them advantages over other people in getting research grants from the government and to get things they could not get before, such as a house to live in.

--- Gaining New Perspectives

Y had received a Master's degree in China in the same area he was working on in the United States. But still he felt that he could learn a lot of new things everyday. This was because "coal mining is different here from China due to the different geographic conditions of mining."

They both believed that they would learn a lot of different ideas, concepts and cultures. Y said, "I predict whatever major you take in U.S. schools, you can contribute a lot to China. It is the way you think and look at things that has changed. We can change China."

--- Credential Opens Doors

Y believed that his studying in the States would bring him advantages over those who did not have this experience. He said,

> "If I go back to China, my study here will make a big difference. But I think it is more of the fact that I get a degree abroad than my actual knowledge. They will assign me a house. 'If I apply for a grant, it is easier for me to get it from the government than others. With money you can do research.'"

Finding 6. Awareness of Cultural Differences in Classroom and in Daily Life

Y and F proved to be sharp in recognizing the cultural differences concerning the teacher-student relationship that involves a lot of different assumptions and traditions between the two countries, such as teaching methodology and philosophy, and many other aspects of life, such as idioms used by people and the use of different measuring systems.

--- Teacher-Student Relationship

In China, teachers are regarded as someone superior who should be respected. Teachers dress formally and require students to do the same in class. In the United States, classrooms are informal. Students can argue with the teachers in class. Y recalled that in China, a teacher may tell his/her student to button up a shirt and behave like a student. American teachers allow students to eat and drink in class. In China, this will be regarded as improper and as not showing respect to teachers. Y recalled another anecdote,

> "When I was in high school, once I had a sip from my cup in class. My teacher pointed at me and told everyone in the class, 'Look what he is doing?' Everyone turned their head, so did I. I was in the second row but one, so people thought it was the guy behind me who did something. He had no one behind him to look at. Poor guy."

Y also remembered that in China, if students wanted to ask questions in the middle of lectures, the teacher might tell them, "Would you please ask questions when I finish my talk?"

F added that teachers in China will sit on chairs or stand in class. They are very formal and boring. Students fall asleep easily. She gave us her impression of the classrooms in the United States,

"I only audited a few times in the universities here, and I found teachers here sit on desks or anywhere they like. Once, I was passing by a classroom, felt curious. So I peeked in there. There was a woman teacher wearing low collars walking around, jumping up and down. If I were a student there, I would pay more attention to the teacher than her class. Dressed very informally."

--- Classroom: Interactive but chaotic

Y and F agreed that teaching is more interactive, creative and flexible here than in China. But sometimes it does not seem to have a structure or rule at all. Teachers in China send students to sleep with long and boring lectures, while American students can be confused to death by a very flexible teacher. Y gave the following examples,

"A fraction formula sometimes can be written in a very unconventional way. You cannot equate the 3000 with X/Y = Z/W. But the way it is written makes you think so. Even professors write it this way. Too flexible. No rules.

"Some teachers can be as flexible as giving us the home work without teaching the concept first. When asked by students, he will say 'I am sorry. I should have told you that you will find the value in the book on page so and so. You will find the value there.' When we could not find it there, he would say 'Sorry, it is in another book. I made a mistake.' However, American students are very good at expressing themselves in class. They are good at doing individual projects too. They can come up with good projects with little teacher instructions. I admire them for their speaking ability and creativity. We had little training like this in China."

--- In Daily Life

Y and F mentioned several differences they found in their everyday life. First, the different systems used to measure length, weight and capacity. Second, the way that language is used and learned.

In China and many other countries in the world, people use the metric systems for length, area, weight, and capacity. In the United States people still use the British-U.S. system such as inch, foot and yard. Y said, "In China, his concepts of the Chinese system, for example, chi, chuen, zhang (for length) were converted to the metric system, but now he has to start the conversation from the Chinese system to metric system and then to the U.S. system.

F added, "Talking about the temperature. Americans still use Fahrenheit while people in most countries in the world use Centigrade. I have to do several conversions before I know the temperature of the day."

Y noted that around the world people learn English, learn from Americans and learn from each other. However, not many Americans learn foreign languages and learn from other countries. "What a pity and loss!" Y said.

Y is also very conscious of the cultural differences existing in the use of language. He gave the following example, "If someone sneezes in public, he will say 'Excuse me.' Others are supposed to say, 'God bless you" in the United States. However, according to the logic of language, the answer should be, 'No problem. You are excused.' Ha ..."

V. Discussion

There are many reasons behind the experiences Y and F have had in living and studying in the United States. However, the following differences are found to be prominent and influential: differences in language, culture, and social and political systems.

Language Differences

The differences between the Chinese and English languages, and the way English is taught in China both contributed to the limited knowledge of Y and F's spoken English.

The English language belongs to an alphabetic system, in which there is a connection between sounds and symbols. Letters of the alphabet are used to represent words. Chinese language belongs to the ideographic system, in which there is no connection between sounds and symbols, but symbols are used to represent ideas. For example, the symbol represents the idea moon; represents farm.

Y and F grew up speaking Chinese as their mother tongue, which is an entirely different language from English. Other European languages, such as French and German, are different languages from English but they at least belong to the same alphabetic system. So it is easier for French- and German-speaking people to learn English than Chinese-speaking people.

Although Y and F started to learn English when they were in elementary schools like most other Chinese children, the way English is taught in China emphasizes more on the written form than the spoken form. English is taught mostly through the traditional grammar-translation method. As a result, students know the grammar and vocabulary of English, but they are still "deaf and mute" in English. This method of teaching rarely provides students with chances to speak and listen to English in authentic situations in China. Although they can get high scores in TOEFL, it does not necessarily mean that they have good oral and aural communication skills in English.

Cultural Differences

Cultural difference is very broad. So, I will only examine some elements of culture relevant to this study. Hilliard (1992) noted that learning styles are a component of cultural behavioral styles, the habits, values predispositions, and references that develop during the child's cultural socialization process (Bennett, 1995).

Worthley (1987) identifies several cultural factors that seem to have an effect on learning styles, and two of them are especially relevant to Chinese students in the U.S. universities.

> One is the socialization process, particularly where a society's child rearing practices fall along a continuum from authoritative to laissez-faire. The more control a society exercises over its children, the more field dependent they become. A second factor is sociocultural tightness. The more the established social structures exert pressure to conform, as in high-context cultures, the more field dependent are its people (Bennett, 1995, p.180).

China is a country where the respect of authority and conformity are upheld. According to Pan and others (1994), traditional Chinese culture is built upon a value system crystallized in Confucianism that indicates a linear hierarchy. This hierarchy is characterized by various dominance-obedience relationships: men dominating women, old dominating young, and the emperor dominating everyone else.

There is a saying in Chinese about the relationship between students and teachers. "If someone taught you as a teacher for one day, he can be your father for the rest of your life."

There is also a story about Wang Wei, a famous Chinese poet (701-761). When Wang was little, he was not a hard-working student. One day, he saw an old lady grinding an iron rod on a rough rock. He asked her what she was doing. She told him she wanted to make this rod into a needle. Wang asked, "How can you make this big iron rod into a tiny needle?" She answered, "As long as I work hard on it and work on it everyday, it will become a nice needle one day." Wang learned a moral from the old lady. He went home and started to work hard. He studied hard everyday persistently. He eventually became a famous poet in China.

The cultural values prevalent in China decide that the Chinese educational system is a rigid and traditional one that encourages hard working and respect for teachers. The classroom in China are traditional, formal and structured. In class, most teachers lecture with little interaction with students. Teachers ask questions and students answer them. Students work closely with text books. It is regarded as a respect and an appreciation to teachers when students listen attentively and quietly.

Feng (1991) stated that American culture values individuality, competition, and independence; in sharp contrast, Chinese culture values collectiveness, and cooperation. American culture values self-expression, whereas Chinese emphasize self-control. Pan and others (1994) also stated that American culture would be characterized by individualism, equality, and freedom, values that are as a set clearly incompatible with the Confucian tradition. They reported,

> "One item that suggests a Confucian construction of authority is our question about expressing disagreement with a senior person. Fewer than one-fourth of the Chinese respondents said they would do this, whereas more than three-fourths of the Americans did" (p.68).

The culture differences between the two nations will help us understand the differences in their educational systems. This will explain why it will take some time for Chinese students like Y and F to get adjusted to the American educational system. They grew up in China and studied under the Chinese educational system for years. That is why the American classroom struck them

as being interactive, flexible, informal and creative, but lack structures and "proper" behaviors from both teachers and students.

Social and Political Differences

Some of the positive and negative experiences of Y and F were caused by the different social and political systems of the two nations. China is a socialist country undergoing economic reforms. When Y and F were in China, housing was still controlled by each work place, which means the work place assigns housing to its members. In the United States housing is controlled by the market economy. Whoever has the paying power and is willing to pay, gets it. Although Y and F are not really well off financially, they live in a better house in the United States than they did in China.

In China, an overpopulated developing country, there are places where the basic necessities in life such as gas, running hot water and convenient bathrooms still need to be established. All these are often taken for granted by people in developed countries such as the United States.

Financially, Chinese students depend heavily on students' aids or teaching and research assistantships to pay their tuition in the United States. As Feng (1991) pointed out, financial problems were of the greatest concern for Chinese students. The economic conditions in China was one major reason for their financial difficulty. China is a developing country, and the Chinese people make much less money than people in developed countries. Even when they make very good Chinese Yuan in China, it is not enough to pay their tuition in the United States once the money is exchanged into U.S. dollars. So like all other Chinese students in the United States,the financial situation limited F's hope of going to schools.

g back to school will come true.

VI. Implications

This study showed us that it is not easy to be a cross-cultural learner. It requires courage, determination and persistence to succeed in doing so. The process of learning involves many efforts -- "blood and tears." There are many cultural elements that the learners need to adjust to, get used to, learn or unlearn. But on the whole, it is a very rewarding and great learning experience.

The study also indicates that educators can assist these students by trying to understand their home cultures, different learning styles, frustrations in adjusting to school life and in overcoming cultural shocks. Educators who are aware of the difficulties these students experience in cross-cultural learning will help them build a bridge between their home and school. An understanding of how different culture groups learn, interact, and use language can help teachers tailor instruction in ways to support the culturally different learners and provide students with a variety of ways to learn so that these students' learning is in harmony with their cultural background.

Schools can help these students by providing a safe and low-anxiety environment, and by providing possible English language classes. Teachers can also help these students by being friends with them and encouraging other students to be friends with them so they will get to know the U.S. culture sooner and better. These students need understanding from teachers and fellow students and time to get used to the ways of learning in the United States, and to become successful learners.

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